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Karin Kukkonen, *Contemporary Comics Storytelling*

Christina Dokou

1 Having matured through at least a century of development —frequently stunted, but not decimated, by the quality-destroying devils of pop commercialization and catering to immature audiences—and having hopefully by now overcome the grand, and perhaps totally gratuitous debate whether they are “literature” or not (Meskin), comics, a.k.a. “sequential art” that usually takes the form of an “autographic” text-and-image “hybrid” (Meskin 231, 234), are finally garnering the scholarly and critical attention they deserve as not only mainstream cultural markers, but as products of refined aesthetic and intellectual creativity. In response to the high-caliber work of comics authors and illustrators that have by now attained legendary status in the field (and occasionally beyond) such as Art Spiegelman (*Maus*), Chris Ware (Jimmy Corrigan, *Smartest Kid on Earth*), Neil Gaiman (*The Sandman*), Alan Moore (*Watchmen*), Grant Morrison (*Filth*), and Enki Bilal (*NikopolTrilogy*) to name but a few, a rapidly increasing body of scholarship on practically every aspect of comics production and evaluation has sprung up, from Scott McCloud’s, Will Eisner’s and Thierry Groensteen’s seminal guides to deciphering the art of comics to insightful and original studies on the genres tropes and affiliations by Roger Sabin, Jan Baetens, Hillary Chute and Umberto Eco, not to mention various thematic anthologies (such as the recent one, edited by Annessa Babic, on *Comics as History, Comics*

as Literature). It is within the proliferating and engaging context of this dynamic field that Kukkonen's latest book, *Contemporary Comics Storytelling*, is to be evaluated as an example of meticulous and imaginative scholarship whose potential for excitement, however, is geared towards a very specific scholarly circle.

[2]

Kukkonen is no stranger to comics studies, having published a number of articles on the subject and, also in 2013 (quite a feat!), another monograph, *Studying Comics and Graphic Novels*, a more classroom-oriented reader on comics analysis from the perspective of narrative theory; or, one might say alternatively, a less theory-oriented counterpart to Neil Cohn's *The Visual Language of Comics* (2014), with its heavy—though brilliantly handled—emphasis on cognitive linguistics as a tool for comics analysis. Kukkonen's opus-in-question differs from other monographs in the field by virtue, primarily, of the question it asks and, secondarily, the methodology it uses to answer it: as the front inner jacket to the hardcover edition says, "Applying a cognitive approach to reading comics in all their narrative richness and intricacy, *Contemporary Comics Storytelling* opens an intriguing perspective on how these works engage the legacy of postmodernism—its subversion, self-reflexivity, and moral contingency." A cognitive-based approach is one of Kukkonen's areas of major specialization and, though not entirely new as a tool to the field of comics studies, the (inter-)disciplinary rigor and precision with which it has been applied in this study is truly laudable. However, what a non-cognitive scientist (whether psychologist or linguist or both) is likely to enjoy more is Kukkonen's application, the close, attentive reading of the comics panels themselves, as well as her choice of subjects. The book's tripartite main section (circumscribed by a detailed introduction, a theory chapter, and a short conclusion chapter, plus extensive notes and a very thorough and up-to-date bibliography) reflects the author's engagement with three notable quality creations in 21st century comics production, choices which indeed allow her to ride the crest of the quality and creativity wave that gave comics and graphic novels their "third wind," so to speak: Bill Willingham's (story; with Mark Buckingham providing most of the pencils) fairy-tale-revamping hit, *Fables* (c.2002), Alan Moore's acclaimed play at meta-textuality in *Tom Strong* (c.2002; various pencillers), and Brian

Azzarello's (story) and Eduardo Risso's (pencils) Eisner award-winning gritty neo-noir, *100 Bullets* (c.2000). To Kukkonen's credit, she does not shy away from dealing with the serial format of comics, choosing three series instead of three graphic novels (a genre more familiar to those engaged in fiction analysis and more amenable to handling due to its circumscribability); serialization—a forgotten dimension of the early novel that is however key to the understanding of the nature of comics—is yet to be given its full due in studies of the genre.

[3] Kukkonen's "Introduction" delves into the question of an interpretative canon for the comics genre, which for her part she seeks in "the formal features of the comics text" by asking how "this meaning-making process work[s] for comics" and how they "create clues, what kinds of gaps… they leave, and how…this contribute[s] to storytelling" (3). This process, however, is complicated by some of the key features and tenets of postmodernity—as defined by Jean-François Lyotard, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean Baudrillard, among other Frenchmen—applied to the comics genre, namely the intertextual pastiche, meta-textuality, and moral contingency as an inevitable outcome of the deconstruction of the concepts of a grounding philosophy and/or taxonomic *episteme*. It is precisely those features that Kukkonen's three chosen comics series reflect, though admittedly with a lesser emphasis on their postmodernity per se than the textual methods by which this postmodern stance is made manifest in each case. In the author's words, the book "is about narrative strategies in comics, the analytical tools they require, and the interventions they make in larger cultural conversations," but in practice the emphasis is rather on the first two parts with the third component being limited to some generalizable, albeit credible, observations.

[4] Chapter I, "How to Analyze Comics Cognitively" takes on a double mission: first, to orient readers to the key terms and fields of Kukkonen's argument, and secondly to offer a close-reading example of how her paradigm operates in praxis. It begins as a response to Umberto Eco's theory of semiotics, Eco having been one of the "mainstream" academic theoreticians to have engaged fruitfully with the genre of comics (in his 1972 "The Myth of Superman," for example). Kukkonen here focuses particularly on his 1976

"A Reading of *Steve Canyon*," to which she juxtaposes her own cognitive-based reading of the same comic series:

> Eco looks for codes, that is, conventionalized signs that we can read because we know, from our cultural context, what they mean. I look for clues, that is, elements on the page that prompt readers to draw particular inferences which, in turn, can be based on our cultural knowledge or psychological capacities. Eco focuses on how this comic (primarily) reproduces and modifies cultural conventions to tell its story. I propose to focus (primarily) on how it engages readers' everyday cognitive capacities for making sense of the world. (13)

5 It may be that a layperson to cognitive science is not in a position to appreciate the difference; however, the sense one gets from the theoretical exposition as presented here is that there is, in the long run, scant difference between the end-result of Eco's semiotics and Kukkonen's cognitive psycholinguistics. While the author posits that her methodological blocks are both far more detailed and far more complex than a semiotician's, ultimately her terms for cognitive clues on the comics page, whether stimuli to "cognitive predilections" (13), allusions to "conceptual metaphors" (19) and "prototypical categories" (22), or "inferences" that lead to "coherent mental models" (35), can and do find their equivalent in models of semiotic analysis (whether by Eco or Barthes). Though this is still an issue for the larger scientific field than for the particular author, the line on where the visual clue/*semeion* ends and the cultural modifier link begins remains blurred. As the author herself concedes, Eco himself moved on considerably towards more complex and implicated models of analysis later on (24), so one could well argue that the difference in sophistication Kukkonen sees between her approach and Eco's is largely a difference of three decades of epistemic advancement in the meantime.

6 Having already offered a couple of cognitive analysis examples from *Fables* to bolster her methodological argument in Chapter I, in Chapter II Kukkonen moves on to a full-fledged cognitive analysis of what she defines as the key postmodernist feature of the series, its play of intertextual allusions. Willingham's acclaimed *Fables*, that has fairytale characters hop dimensions into Upper East Side New York to avoid the razing of their realms, and then develop in ways that areboth congruent with, but also surprisingly askew as regards their folklore personae, is an ideal playground for a study of how "contexts of relevance"—"a small-scale version of the 'cognitive environments' in relevance theory" (59) interact with one

another and the reader's expectations. If that reminds one of reader-response theory, it is because the two approaches have a lot in common as per Kukkonen's reading, though Stanley Fish's approach would be more large-scale compared to a cognitive micro-analysis of clues. Kukkonen accompanies us through the hopping of *Fables* into and out of various genre schemata, namely the postmodern fairy-tale (from which the series "borrows subversive strategies" yet not "the emancipatory agenda" of feminist folklore retellings, 67), the filmic caper (68), sword-and-cape heroic fantasy, war narratives, horror fiction, film noir and the detective novel. For some reason, Kukkonen's account leaves out some of what could possibly be the most interesting interpretative frames for the series, namely the refugee and migrant narratives (the Fables are, after all, "in Exile"), opting as a model for the war narrative the hard-boiled tale of the super-soldier squad (in a haunted castle, to boot!) instead of the gripping and, frankly, quite realistic in their fairytale-ness, accounts of combatant and noncombatant survivors of war atrocities. Perhaps this is because the former scenario offers a recognizable bow to another, extremely well-known comic character, Marvel's Nick Fury (the director of S.H.I.E.L.D.) from his WWII days with his troupe of Howling Commandos. Or maybe it's because American audiences, unlike European ones, have not been familiar with the repercussions of modern warfare on their own home soil. Given the series' plea for being taken as an adult comic with serious fictional aspirations, however, I believe such a choice would have benefited both its and Kukkonen's case, as would perhaps a brief comparison with Alan Moore's superb series of a similar theme, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (c.1999) and its spinoffs. Still, even the given selection of genre schemata explored is enough to conclude that, unlike postmodern narratives where playful subversion is paramount, "*Fables* does not have to break with conventions and expectations in order to present its readers with sophisticated storytelling. The series combines conflicting generic frames, but its careful and intelligent treatment of genre decorum allows for highly satisfying and immersive storytelling" (86).

7 In Chapter Three, "Fictionality in Comics: *Tom Strong* , Storyworlds, and the Imagination," Kukkonen examines how Alan Moore, a celebrated comics auteur, (in)famous for

his exploration of the interplay between appearance, fiction and reality that toys with hard questions about conspiracy theorizing and modern Western totalitarian ideologies (as in *Watchmen, V for Vendetta, or From Hell*), "addresses the issues of fictionality" and "the workings of human imagination" as unapologetically exploited in the comics genre itself (87): "this chapter looks into the ways in which comics establish storyworlds, either as hierarchical models of fiction and reality, …or as alternative, equally valid worlds, as in the superhero multiverse," and thus "create self-reflexive and immersive metafiction" (88). Instead of, like Plato, trying to either banish over-the-top fantasy escapism in comics—for being "simplistic, repetitive, and ideologically compromised" (124)—or, like Sidney, trying to find a respectable interpretation of its quirks, Kukkonen sides with Moore to show how "the imagination is just as much part of a healthy human mind as reason and judgment" (94), helping cognitive processes whenever our brain needs to work out a possible scenario of variables; and, what is more, pointing to Aristotelian universals about the human condition via the use of superpowers and gaudy costumes (95). Thus Kukkonen reiterates here her 2010 argument that comics work as "modern myth," reflecting "the changing ideology of their times, and [also] as escapist fiction they seem to serve a distinct political function" (96). Furthermore, she shows how the metaleptic devices of comic (like Splash Branigan, the sentient ink blob from *Tomorrow Stories*—or, I would add, Marvel's *Deadpool*), by exposing the mechanisms of "readerly immersion," allow readers to reflect upon their own cognitive processes and the value of fiction in them. Finally, precisely because it foregrounds the ropes and pulleys of its own creation, *Tom Strong* emerges "as a Master Narrative of the Superhero Genre," for it encapsulates playfully the whole arsenal of what for Umberto Eco produces the "iterative scheme" of superhero stories (20), and comics storytelling in general: "The series forms a 'master narrative' of the superhero genre in Lyotard's sense, since it brings together different phenomena of comics history, its intellectual contexts, and its inspirations within a common narrative structure" (113).

[8] Chapter Four, "Fictional Minds in Comics: *100 Bullets* , Characterization, and Ethics" diverges from the previous discussions in turning towards ethics, as opposed to formal/

generic devices. In that sense, although it keeps well within the line of Kukkonen's enquiry into the postmodern condition, exploring its alleged and infamous relativist dictum (simplified by the critic) that "any kind of morality is socially constructed and contingent upon the social and historical situation from which it arises" (133), it is perhaps the most challenging chapter in the book in its being related to cognitive theory as a comics paradigm of a philosophical "thought experiment" (128). The series' premise, of a mysterious agency offering wronged individuals the opportunity of homicidal revenge without legal repercussions by giving them an untraceable gun and 100 bullets along with the name of the person responsible for their misery, is attuned to the postmodern philosophical question of the impossibility of justice because of a Derridean "*différance* of value" (qtd. in Kukkonen 134) between generic fixed principles and individual action/ choice. Kukkonen shows how the "background-foreground compositions on the pages" (140) flesh out the idea that "the lives in *100 Bullets* [and of the world in general, as per postmodernism] are tightly connected and that each action has consequences reaching much further than one would expect" (139); hence individual agency, even when directed by "moral" codes, might result in unforeseeable wrongdoing, and vice-versa; and while that does not necessarily cancel the validity of a moral edict, it certainly makes its application extremely problematic. Eventually, however, as philosophers from Socrates to Jacques Derrida and Zygmunt Bauman emphatically claim we must, individuals learn that a larger relativist frame does not negate the necessity of day-to-day, small-scale, personal moral choice of doing right, and this is also reflected in *100 Bullets* through its central focus on the "*bildungsroman*" of the character Dizzy Cordova, and her "move from contingency to commitment" (176; 169). This idea of moral choice in the face of contingency, fleshed out in the latter half of the chapter, is handled much better than the first part, where the frequent digressions, albeit necessarily, to the underlying postmodernist philosophy and its opponents, as well as to the linguistic theory of "conceptual metaphors" by Lakoff and Johnson (Kukkonen 143), take up so much space that, eventually, discussion of the comic is limited to how well it fits the theory, rather than pointing to a rich reading of it that goes beneath the surface. Still, the understanding of the fantastic comics scenario of the 100 untraceable bullets and its iconography as a metaphor for

corporate war games in contemporary global (and often, for that reason, supra-jurisdictional) fiscal and power transactions is perhaps the most interesting revelation of this chapter.

[9]

In summation, Kukkonen's book may ultimately have more to say about the postmodern narrative mindset than for the individual comics examined. However, the book's "Conclusion" does draw its separate findings towards "A Narratology of Comics" derived from film and fiction (181), stating the need for further efforts into establishing an enunciatory apparatus for the graphic genre, and clearing up some epistemological narrative-related issues pertinent to it. It is here that, as a final remark, the concept of serialization is brought forth and considered soberly in terms of its narrative particularities and their impact on human cognitive mechanisms as buildup devices. Ultimately, comics seriality might claim the role of the key narrative role for postmodernity since, inevitably, in one's view of postmodernity, where nothing is ever really new and conclusiveness was slashed to death by Barthes's *S/Z*, there will always be an exciting "next issue" (Kukkonen 187).

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